

# NATO's Northeastern Flank—Emerging Opportunities for Engagement

## An Overview

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### Key findings

- U.S. defense engagement priorities in central Europe are shifting in the face of Russian aggression.
- By engaging strategically on NATO's eastern flank, the United States can strengthen deterrence while minimizing inadvertent escalation.
- Key countries where new opportunities for deeper partnerships are emerging include the Baltics, Finland, Poland, and Sweden.

For the first 25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the United States and its allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) planned, postured, and engaged in Europe on the assumption that Russia was militarily capable of harming NATO and its European partners but did not intend to do so. Despite occasional tensions in relations between Washington and Moscow, Russia was widely assumed to be on a trajectory toward closer integration and more-peaceful relations with Europe, the United States, and its other neighbors. The Kremlin's 2014 annexation of the eastern Ukrainian region of Crimea and active efforts to occupy and destabilize other parts of eastern Ukraine sharply challenged this

underlying assumption. Aggression in Ukraine, combined with Russian snap exercises on NATO's borders, multiple aerial incursions into NATO and partner territory, cruise missile modernization, dangerous nuclear blustering, anti-Western rhetoric, and domestic political uncertainty, have forced a deep reassessment of U.S. strategy, plans, and posture in Europe and other regions in which Russia is active. The Kremlin's intervention on behalf of the Bashar Al-Assad regime in Syria underscored its willingness to use force for a broad range of objectives that run counter to those of the United States.

These developments clearly have major implications for U.S. Air Force and broader U.S. Department of Defense strategy, posture, and defense engagement. RAND was thus asked to assess opportunities for enhanced partnering in central and eastern Europe in the face of this increased Russian activity.

We took a strategic, top-down approach to the analysis, focusing on nine key countries on NATO's northeastern flank—the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Sweden. After an in-depth political-military assessment of each country's response to Russia's war in Ukraine, we identified countries in which support for U.S. regional and

global objectives is liable to be most enduring. With an understanding of how and what these countries might contribute to the growing need to counter Russian activities in the region, we identified specific partnering priorities that could help strengthen regional deterrence. The following summarizes top-line findings from the full report, which will be published later this year.

## EMERGING NEW REQUIREMENTS FOR DEFENSE ENGAGEMENT IN EUROPE

U.S. defense priorities in the region are shifting. As a result, so will the focus of U.S. partnerships.

- Partnership engagement in Europe after the Cold War aimed primarily to strengthen and reform the militaries in central Europe to prepare them for eventual membership in NATO and the European Union. After 9/11, U.S. engagement activities shifted to strengthening these countries' ability to fight in out-of-area operations as members of U.S. coalitions. They also sought to ensure the military-to-military relationships necessary for U.S. basing for overseas operations.
- NATO has now drawn down its operations in Afghanistan, and the United States and its allies are less involved overall in operations in the Middle East than before (although this could be changing). Simultaneously, Russian aggression has led to a refocus on ensuring the territorial security of NATO allies in central Europe against a potential Russian threat, including in public statements from senior U.S. defense and military officials.

Ongoing RAND research indicates that, among potential problem areas, the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) are particularly exposed to conventional and unconventional threats from Russia.

- The potential for NATO–Russia conflict—inadvertent and otherwise—exists across the Black Sea, Balkans, and elsewhere. Any conflict between NATO and Russia would be very difficult to contain to a single region or domain.
- The area of single-greatest concern for NATO in this regard will be the Baltic States. Strengthening deterrence and reassurance in the Baltic region will therefore be a key priority shaping U.S. regional strategy in the face of renewed tensions with Russia.

- In the Baltic States, geographical realities, the presence of advanced Russian offensive and defensive weaponry in the Kaliningrad Oblast, and the limitations of defensive capabilities of the Baltic States themselves pose significant challenges to NATO.

The specific strategies and requirements for strengthening defense and deterrence in the Baltics have been and continue to be examined and debated. The importance of certain broad categories of requirements is emerging, however.

- On land, for instance, the United States has announced its intention to preposition armor and other stocks across several countries in the region. Meanwhile, regional deployments of U.S. and allied armored and infantry brigades have been publicly mooted by several parties—above all, the leaders of the Baltic States.
- In the air domain, the importance of adequate allied infrastructure that would permit rapid regional surge access in crisis conditions is increasingly clear. So is the potential need to train and equip allied forward air controllers, as well as a need to ensure adequate U.S. and allied capabilities and stocks for the suppression-of-enemy-air-defense mission. Basing and overflight rights in crisis conditions, moreover, remain issues of significance.
- Across all domains, the importance of closely integrated command and control (C2), both between air and land components and with allies, is also clear, as is overall interoperability, as established and demonstrated through frequent joint, multinational exercises.

Engagement with several of the countries considered for this study will be crucial to achieving these objectives. Although their will and ability to contribute to specific deterrence tasks will vary, the Air Force should seek to build close partnerships across multiple domains, including the capability for coordinated air defense operations and air–ground/surface attack operations in the region. These are also the countries in which the United States will have to operate in the event of a crisis, either in combined combat operations or for forward basing in support of those operations. No less important is the fact that these are the countries where the United States will need to posture, operate, and engage for deterrence in peacetime.

By building the necessary relationships and by shaping partner plans, strategy, and capabilities toward achievable objectives, Air Force engagement will be vital to laying the groundwork for

the necessary cooperation and thus maximizing the value that these allies and partners can bring to the table.

## STRATEGIC TRENDS IN NATO'S NORTHEASTERN FLANK

The countries considered for this study stretch from central Europe northward through the eastern Nordic region. Five share borders with Russia, three more share borders with Russia's close ally Belarus, and three border Ukraine itself. All are affected by the war in Ukraine in one way or another. These countries are, moreover, often those that have been most directly targeted by Russia's recent military activities. Many of them have been threatened by Russian snap exercises on their borders, Russian propaganda directed against their citizens, cyberattacks, espionage, and airspace and maritime violations of their territory. Although Russian saber rattling and muscle flexing have also targeted other European countries, this group includes most of those that have been directly affected by renewed tension with Russia (outside Ukraine itself). Indeed, aside from Turkey, which is increasingly overwhelmed by the war in Syria, all of the allies currently most likely to call for NATO military action by invoking Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty<sup>1</sup> are included in this group (with the possible exception of Romania). Examining the opportunities for closer defense engagement with them is therefore timely and appropriate.

The response of these countries to increased tension with Russia, however, has been somewhat varied. We did not find significant new opportunities in three of the four "Visegrad" countries—the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary.<sup>2</sup> New opportunities for partnering in these countries are limited for domestic political and economic reasons or because they lack military and defense resources. Opportunities for partnering are emerging in other countries: Poland, the Baltic States, Sweden, and Finland.

The case studies in the main report provide strategic overviews of the defense engagement climate in each country, tailored for leaders and analysts in the U.S. defense enterprise and Air Force in particular. In the rest of this section, we make general observations regarding strategic trends in the group.

### Poland

- Poland has long been concerned about the possibility of a hostile, resurgent Russia. Naturally, this concern has intensified in the face of increased Russian aggressiveness. Polish interest in engaging with the United States across a range of defense areas, including those of significance to the Air Force, is very strong.
- Poland's willingness and capability to contribute resources to regional defense are also significant. Poland aspires to become a major regional military power on par with the west-European powers, such as France. It has introduced an ambitious military modernization plan and is one of only five NATO countries currently expected to meet the NATO objective of 2 percent of gross domestic product spent on defense—although Poland should be expected to do even more than this given its level of concern. It also has a relatively large economic base on which it can build.
- The environment for leveraging Poland's eagerness to invest in capabilities to strengthen the bilateral relationship and reinforce deterrence in the region is excellent, provided that rising nationalism in Poland does not create a crisis in its relations with Germany or other key European powers. Poland also needs to support NATO and the European Union's southern strategies wholeheartedly to get their full support on the eastern flank.

### Sweden and Finland

- In both Sweden and Finland, Russia's aggressive behavior has spurred new domestic debate over the prospect of closer cooperation with NATO and the United States.
- Neither Sweden nor Finland is a member of NATO, although they both have close partnership arrangements that allow for excellent interoperability. As of 2016, it still seemed unlikely that either country would join NATO in the near future, but both countries see an interest in deepening cooperation with the alliance, including in the air domain. NATO membership in the medium term is possible, and that possibility should be made clear to Russia and leveraged as an additional deterrent against Russian aggression.
- Even more than Poland, these two Nordic countries have a strong economic base to contribute to strengthening regional defense and deterrence, should they choose to do so. Sweden is a wealthy country with an advanced industrial-technological base, is important geographically, and has grown far more open to partnering with

<sup>1</sup> Washington, D.C., April 4, 1949. As of April 22, 2016: [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_17120.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Named for a 1991 summit in the Hungarian town of Visegrád. The fourth is Poland.

the United States in light of Russia's aggressive behavior. It operates in many advanced military fields of interest to the Air Force, including not only advanced fighter aircraft but also space and cyber. Finland is also a wealthy country with an advanced industrial-technological base and relatively powerful military capabilities, including a sizable F/A-18 C/D force equipped with Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missiles (JASSMs).

- Foreign policy experts and leaders in both Sweden and Finland express concern that a military crisis in the Baltic States would be highly detrimental to both countries' national interests. Hence, although both countries are concerned and vigilant about the risk of a direct attack on their territory, they are equally, if not more, concerned about how a conflict elsewhere in the Baltic region might affect them. Because their interests in regional stability are so deep, Finland and Sweden's commitment to deterring regional conflict should remain correspondingly strong and credible.

## Baltic States

- The small sizes of the Baltic States—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—make them highly vulnerable to Russian aggression. Estonia and Latvia also have Russian-speaking populations who could be vulnerable to Russian manipulation for unconventional or hybrid warfare strategies. Because of its border with Russia's Kaliningrad enclave, Lithuania is also a flashpoint for conflict.
- Like Poland, the Baltic States have long expressed anxieties about their exposure to Russian attack. Unsurprisingly, and again like Poland, their interest in closer defense cooperation with the United States has only intensified with the changes in the regional security environment.
- Unlike Poland, the Baltic States' defense resources are very limited. Their air and other armed forces are tiny. Currently, they would be utterly unable to defend themselves against a determined Russian attack without major outside help. As a result, they are eager for any engagement the United States or NATO will offer.
- The challenge will be to determine the nature and types of engagement most liable to strengthen defense and deterrence in these countries (see "Specific Engagement Activities"). The absence of native airpower capabilities should not lead the Air Force to neglect these countries. To the contrary, it is indicative of significant need, especially in light of the threat from Russia. That threat calls for not

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only much-enhanced Baltic air defenses but also enhancements to intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and air-related infrastructure, among other things.

## Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary

- Hungary has been among the most reticent about the U.S. and NATO approach to Russia during the Ukraine crisis. Although Hungary has not broken formally with the alliance, NATO's tensions with Russia, on which Hungary depends for natural gas, have led Budapest to significantly diverge from Washington and many European capitals. The current Hungarian government, led by semi-authoritarian populist Victor Orban, also has worryingly close ties to Moscow.
- There are reasons to believe that Russia-related tensions with Hungary could diminish over time, however. Hungary has contributed to reassurance efforts with air policing deployments in the Baltics, despite its pro-Moscow stance. Moreover, insofar as tensions continue over Russia, Hungarian leaders might actually come to view closer cooperation with the United States at Papa Air Base as an antidote.
- Although key Czech leaders are cognizant of the Russian threat and have aligned with the United States, they face domestic political dynamics that make a dramatic ramp-up in defense spending (and consequently in defense capabilities) unlikely. The United States can expect the Czechs to continue to help with such missions as Icelandic air policing and Baltic air policing, and contribute in small numbers to operations elsewhere. Large amounts of support, however, are unlikely in the near future.

- In Slovakia, there is stronger pro-Russian sentiment, stoked by Russian propaganda and other forces. The Slovak economy is small, and the military is in poor condition. Hence, although the Slovaks have invested in some new capabilities (e.g., UH-60s), their overall contribution to any NATO operation—particularly in terms of airpower—will be quite limited.

## SPECIFIC ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

There is a broad range of activities that the U.S. Defense Department can and does seek to undertake in the countries considered for this study, as elsewhere in the world. Engagement activities can include, for example, force posture activities, military exercises, equipping activities (foreign military financing and foreign military sales), technology transfer, information sharing arrangements (physical and legal), deployments or exchanges of personnel for security cooperation, education and training (i.e., of foreign personnel, through International Military Education and Training or other programs), and direct military-to-military engagements (senior or other levels). When it comes to these countries, however, there are specific activities that should be prioritized in support of top-level U.S. strategic objectives. The following recommendations are based on our strategic assessment of the political military trends in the country, its resources, and the requirements of likely U.S. regional strategy going forward.

### Poland

Seek to ensure that Poland is able to provide a secure logistics and staging point for forward-based U.S. and NATO operations in the region by denying airspace and defending against short-, medium-, and long-range missile attacks. Poland also should eventually have capabilities to contribute to air-air and air-ground/surface operations over the Baltic States, Baltic Sea, or Belarus. To this end, prioritize

- continued increases in the size and resourcing of the aviation detachment at Lask Air Base. Activities at Lask should focus on training the Polish F-16 crews to allow Poland to deploy its F-16s in an operational setting as soon as possible. Increases in bilateral F-16 exercises at Lask are also desirable to demonstrate capability, continued commitment, and persistent presence in Poland and the region

- continue rotational presence of F-22s to Poland, including at Lask
- assess potential for increasing sale of JASSM and adding JASSM-ER (Extended Range) to Polish missile inventories
- initiate a feasibility study of a Polish F-35 purchase.

The United States should also encourage Poland's ability to provide intratheater fixed- and rotary-wing lift, reinforcing its transition away from old Russian-made An-28 light aircraft and Mi-8 and Mi-2 transport helicopters, while encouraging the eventual development of a refueling and even strategic lift capability.

The United States and NATO should also seek to expand Poland's ISR ability, particularly its nascent unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) fleet, across the spectrum of operations—short-, medium-, and long-range—so as to better contribute to the Polish ability to aid in air-to-ground/surface operations over the Baltic States, Baltic Sea, or Belarus. Specifically,

- offer a small training team at the newly established UAV base in Poland (at Mirosławiec airfield), to assist with joint exercise planning and ISR capability development
- develop a joint UAV exercise program bilaterally or via NATO
- in the longer term, encourage Polish acquisition of medium- and long-range UAVs.

Finally, the United States should continue to encourage public-private partnerships in Poland to strengthen Poland's ability to defend against cyber attacks, as well as its expertise on space issues, by offering joint-training, small-scale cyber-response exercises aimed at damage mitigation, or by supporting public-private cyber and space workshops in Poland.

In senior leader and operator engagements with Poland, the focus should be on continuing to emphasize common core interests in regional stability while fostering understanding within the Polish military of the complexity of the U.S. perspective on Russia and escalation concerns. Engagement should also stress the importance of Polish support for and capabilities toward addressing NATO's southern flank threats.

### Sweden and Finland

The United States should aim to support Swedish and Finnish efforts to demonstrate that they are capable of defending their airspace with confidence for several weeks and a minimum of U.S. or NATO support. This will ensure that these Nordic partners are available as a launching point for allied logistics

and air operations over the Baltics if needed. Ideally, both Sweden and Finland would also have a capability for air operations against air and ground forces in the Baltics and surface vessels on the Baltic Sea. To this end, priorities include

- increasing Swedish and Finnish participation in such large and complex U.S. exercises as Red Flag and Green Flag; increasing the frequency and sophistication of U.S., Swedish, and Finnish exercises at Ämari Air Base; inviting Sweden and Finland to directly participate in Baltic and Icelandic air policing missions; involving Sweden as early as possible in related exercise planning
- sustained U.S. training on Nordic territory on the model of Arctic Challenge 2015
- encouraging Sweden and Finland to maintain sufficient munitions stocks, especially for air-air, but also for air-ground (including JASSM and JASSM-ER)
- encouraging Sweden and Finland (along with other allies) to build an air-to-air refueling consortium on the model of NATO's Strategic Airlift Capability; increasing training with Sweden and Finland on aerial refueling
- encouraging Swedish and Finnish participation in NATO ballistic missile defense discussions and exercises with the possibility of eventual integration into the NATO system
- engaging Finnish Air Force and Army leaders on Finland's air defense capability, particularly as Helsinki seeks to upgrade its air defenses, potentially by pooling with Sweden.

A key reason the United States should seek to strengthen the relationship with both countries is to ensure high confidence that U.S. aircraft will have access to Swedish airspace and bases in the event of a conflict. Sweden is unlikely to guarantee such access publicly, but the likelihood that it would be granted in a crisis can be reinforced by considering increased personnel exchanges with both U.S. European Command and the U.S. Office of the Secretary of Defense and working via partner engagement to develop a common strategic picture, including via contingency planning. U.S. defense planners should also engage in more tabletop exercises and scenario-based seminars to facilitate more-concrete policy discussions with Sweden and Finland.

In the longer term, Sweden and Finland are countries with potential to make contributions to ISR with enhanced UAV capabilities. Benefiting from this will require adequate interoperability and data-sharing agreements, both bilaterally and between the Nordic countries and NATO. Eventually, Sweden and Finland should also be expected to develop space capabilities with

military ISR applications. The United States could shape this development today via personnel exchanges or other cooperation on space research, for example, at Swedish research facilities, such as Esrange, or working with Sweden and Finland on protection of critical commercial or dual-use space infrastructure. Another potentially fruitful initiative would be to establish an innovative, cyber-focused relationship between U.S. Air National Guard and Sweden and Finland; in addition, intensified sharing of cyber research, knowledge, and best practices with Finland and Sweden via exchanges and joint subregional public-private seminars or other forms of training is desirable.

Finally, although Sweden and Finland are not seeking full membership in NATO, membership is a longer-term possibility. Stockholm and Helsinki should be encouraged to make it clear that Moscow's destabilization of the region only pushes their countries further toward full membership. Accordingly, it will be important to prepare the ground. At the same time, efforts to strengthen intra-Nordic and Nordic-Baltic relations should continue.

## The Baltic States

For all three Baltic states, the critical objective needs to be ensuring that these states are able to rapidly receive allied ground forces and operate in support of allied air superiority forces, for deterrence in peacetime as well as in a crisis situation. To this end, priorities include

- sustained support for joint terminal attack controller and joint fires observer training for both Baltic and other NATO ground forces
- agreements on rules of engagement and C2 arrangements for crisis situations among allies and partners that could provide air assets to the region
- mid-level engagements to identify priority airfields beyond Ämari, Lielvarde, and Šiauliai for future improvement
- prepositioning of supplies for crisis operations, including fuel, munitions, and other equipment at Ämari, Lielvarde, and Šiauliai, as well as other locations
- analyzing potential additional improvements to Latvian facilities
- greater cooperation between the Baltic States and Nordic Defense Cooperation, especially with Finland and Sweden.

In addition, over the medium and long terms, the United States should seek to strengthen the Baltics' individual and subregional contributions to air and missile defenses, through

- senior leader discussions on the development of Baltic air defense capabilities, including the appropriate balance between Baltic and NATO assets
- sale or grant of short- and medium-range air defense systems to the Baltic States.

It is also desirable, and within reach for the Baltic countries, to develop ISR capabilities for monitoring a developing crisis situation, through

- senior leader discussions regarding longer-term goals for Baltic ISR and how the United States can contribute to building capabilities
- exploring enhanced ISR capabilities for small, manned Estonian aircraft
- exercises to test ISR capabilities in border areas and C2 arrangements in crisis
- potential sale or grant of additional radars where needed, such as low-altitude radars for border areas
- exploring the potential sale or grant of small or medium UAVs.

Finally, in the cyber domain, Estonia has worked to make itself a regional hub. This effort deserves continued U.S. support, including via personnel exchanges and support for training exercises.

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The foregoing list of recommendations is not intended to be comprehensive of all the activities the Air Force, let alone the Defense Department, might consider or pursue in the countries studied for this report. It is, however, a list of priorities consistent with political military trends in these countries and evolving U.S. regional strategy. To be sure, there are no certainties in defense planning or in the countries examined for this study. Among these uncertainties, the greatest of all is, no doubt, Russia itself, whose future trajectory spans the gamut between persistent Putinism and catastrophic collapse. Needless to say, the need for a strategy that links regional political and other realities to specific objectives remains essential.

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## About This Report

In 2014, RAND was asked whether new opportunities for U.S. Air Force engagement were emerging in central Europe as a result of Russian aggression in Ukraine. This document presents an overview of our findings from the resulting research effort; our full report will appear later in 2016. That report examines the impact of renewed tension between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Russia over a group of key allies and partners in central and northeastern Europe. It provides overviews of how the climate for defense engagement is changing in each country. There are in-depth assessments for nine key countries on NATO's northeastern flank—the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Sweden—that focus on developing robust engagement strategies for these countries. Although both politics and resources will constrain partnership opportunities and the ability of these countries to contribute to U.S. regional defense objectives, opportunities for strengthening partnerships do exist in multiple areas.

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